



Soviet ballerina Maya Plisetskaya.

BY RICH LIPSJO—THE WASHINGTON POST

# Maya Plisetskaya & The Truth of Dance

The Bolshoi Ballerina on Her Life and Her Art

By Pamela Sommers  
Special to The Washington Post

*Prima ballerina assoluta*—the phrase suggests an imperious dancing goddess who truly lives only when she inhabits a rarefied realm of swans, sylphs and theatrical mayhem.

Yet here sits Maya Plisetskaya, the Bolshoi Ballet superstar whom many regard as the greatest ballerina of the 20th century, chatting animatedly in her native Russian, looking perfectly at home perched on an armchair. At 62, her auburn hair trails down her back, framing a face that suggests both world-weary elegance and prim girlishness. She wears an emerald-green taffeta blouse with a matching skirt decorated with snaking black lines, garments that reveal a long, slender body kept in peak condition by daily class and regular performances.

For unlike most ballerinas of her generation, Plisetskaya still dances.

"I'm perfectly aware that, technically speaking, I cannot do a great deal," she admits candidly through her interpreter and longtime friend, Helen Atlas. "But a person of my age and experience can show a great deal of artistry. It's the emotional impact that is much stronger than the technical one. And there must be



something to it, because I've had such success on this tour, such wonderful reviews, and the audience has appreciated me so much."

The tour to which she refers began last month in Boston, when Plisetskaya, joined by a troupe of Bol-

Plisetskaya in the Bolshoi Ballet production of "Swan Lake."

See PLISETSKAYA, D10, Col. 1

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# Ballerina

PLISETSKAYA, From D1

Shoi associates, performed several of her signature works—Alberto Alonso's "Carmen Suite," Roland Petit's "A Rose Malade," her own "Anna Karenina" and "The Lady With a Small Dog," and her inimitable rendition of "The Dying Swan."

It was all a part of the "Making Music Together" festival, a Soviet-American cultural extravaganza, orchestrated by Boston opera director Sarah Caldwell and Plisetskaya's husband, celebrated Soviet composer Rodion Khachaturian. The Bolshoi dancers have just completed a 12-city U.S. tour, and tonight, Plisetskaya will be at Lisner Auditorium for the U.S. premiere of "Maya Plisetskaya: Things Known and Unknown," a film portrait of the dancer being presented as part of Filmfest 88. She and the director, Boris Galanter, will take questions after the screening.

Galanter has served as both friend and foe to the ballerina. Though ballet aficionados may swoon over videos of Plisetskaya in her prime—her mysteriously lyrical/brilliantly venomous Odette/Odile in "Swan Lake," her mis-

chievous Kiti in "Don Quixote," her bewitching Zarema in "The Fountain of Bakhchisarai," her defiant Carmen—she has problems with her cinematic self.

"I don't like my old films," she says. "I see a lot that isn't correct. It's very hard to please me. I'm very self-critical. Certainly, film is a very good thing, because it is of great assistance in your development, the best teacher. But it is my nature never to do the same thing over and over again. I've always improvised, and listened to the music above all. And I've never gotten stuck in one particular style or era."

She has also lived her life as a rebel, an independent-minded firebrand to whom art matters more than all else: country, family, personal freedom. And she has suffered for her convictions.

Born in Moscow to a family of Jewish artists—her mother was a silent-screen actress (you can see traces of it in the daughter's riveting acting style), her uncle a celebrated Bolshoi dancer-choreographer who still teaches company class—she began dancing instinctively, and early on exhibited signs of the fighter she was to become.

"When I was very young, I did it quite naturally, not because I wanted to become a ballerina. I was always

drawn to the theater . . . I saw my first play at the age of 4, and when I came home I reenacted everyone's role. Also, we had a pianist living with us in those days of communal apartments. He played very well, and I was introduced to very good music.

"From the beginning, if I was told to do something, I'd do just the opposite. My arms and wrists were always black and blue because the girls who took care of me would grab me so I wouldn't run away. I did, in fact, run away from kindergarten, to the complete other end of Moscow. Terrible panic set in at the school. Some guy was walking by me, and I came up very close to him so that people wouldn't notice that there was this little girl by herself. It took me an hour and a half to get home.

"I never liked school—the atmosphere, the odor. I loved being thrown out of class, because they would continue to study and I would be free. I always had an 'anti' feeling for the group, for the collective, whether it was camps, or standing in line . . . We'd be going somewhere on the bus, singing a song, and I never joined in. A lot of things I had to do were against my nature."

One would think that the discipline and formalism of ballet would have frustrated her. Instead, she took to it

with a fervor and natural ability that left her teachers at the Bolshoi School in awe. Her space-gobbling leaps, rock-solid balance and prodigious musicality sent her straight from the classroom to the stage. Before the age of 20, she was dancing leading roles, and soon her name was on the lips of all ballet-going Muscovites.

Yet the trouble had already begun. Her mother had been sentenced to a labor camp, her father disappeared, and the family subsequently learned of his death in the Gulag. As a result, Plisetskaya herself was regarded by the KGB as politically unreliable. She was never granted the personal privileges enjoyed by other artists of her stature. Until 1959, she was forbidden to perform in the West. And from the moment Yuri Grigorovich became artistic director of the Bolshoi in 1964—a position he holds to this day—the ballerina's talents were underused and her opinions rejected.

"I was never protected," she explains. "In most situations, nobody came to my aid. On the contrary, people defended others against me. I was not very desirable. There were times which were awful, tragic, when I was right on the verge of leaving the Bolshoi Theatre."

Then why didn't she defect, like so many of her fellow artists?

She sighs heavily, and takes her time answering.

"To leave the Bolshoi was an impossibility. My best performances were danced there. It's the best stage in the world. I just couldn't do it. When I would look at those eight columns in front of the theater, something inside me would turn inside out and upside down."

Because Plisetskaya caused such a sensation during the company's visits to the West, she was eventually accorded certain opportunities. Choreographers outside the Soviet Union—Alonso, Petit, Maurice Béjart—created roles for her, which she danced on the Bolshoi stage and internationally. And she was allowed to choreograph for herself. Ironically, these tailor-made works came at a time when her technique had begun to diminish. And certainly none of them can be considered a lasting work of art.

Only recently she was appointed artistic director of the Spanish National Ballet. In the early '80s, she worked as a choreographer with the ballet company of the Rome Opera.

"None of it has sufficed," she says sadly. "I would have loved to have worked with many more choreographers. It's very important for any dancer to have pieces made specifically

ly for them." She laughs bitterly. "I certainly haven't done too much."

Though she clearly mourns certain artistic decisions she has made, she has never regretted one very personal choice: to forgo the experience of motherhood. The personal and professional relationship she shares with her husband has been enough.

"It's very simple," she declares. "Your figure changes. Never have I seen a ballerina who has become any better after she has given birth. Perhaps if you're 18, when nothing has begun in your career . . . When you're out on stage, any imperfection is immediately obvious."

"Also, a child demands a great deal of attention, and that takes away from your art. You have to belong to 100 percent."

Is that how she would like to be remembered, as one who has devoted herself to her muse above all else?

The question pleases her; her eyes almost appear to mist over. "It would be very nice not to be forgotten," she begins. "I believe that I have been able to give something to others, they will remember it. I'm very happy to have had such a success here in America—people have come to me in tears. To me, that's much more important than for an artist to cry herself. That's how I would like to be remembered."